

PARENTAGE OF DEFECTIVES

By C. P. BLACKER, M.A., M.D., M.R.C.P.

WHAT would be the value of eugenic sterilization if limited to mental defectives, but applied to them in the most thorough-going way? Authorities differ on the subject. A view commonly held by persons with first-hand experience is that, whereas mental defectiveness can be attributed to genetic rather than to environmental causes in the majority of cases, only in a small percentage—something in the neighbourhood of 5 per cent.—do these genetic causes take the form of certifiable defectiveness in one or both parents. Hence, it is argued, if a sterilization law, limited to mental defectives, but applied to them in the most thorough-going way, had been put into effect a generation ago, so that all defectives then in the country had been prevented from breeding, the incidence of mental deficiency in this generation would have been reduced by about 5 per cent. only. Though the majority of the remaining 95 per cent. of defectives would owe their defectiveness to hereditary causes, in general these would not take the form of certifiable defectiveness in their parents.

Much attention was given to this subject when the *Society* presented its evidence before the Brock Committee. In reviewing the continental literature, as we had been asked to do by Mr. Brock, we found that the diversity of standards adopted by different authors in estimating mental deficiency made it difficult to interpret their findings in terms of the criteria which are employed in this country. This difficulty was particularly marked in connection with the term "oligophrenia," which, when used by German and Scandinavian writers, has a wider meaning than the terms *amentia* or mental defectiveness employed here. That is to say, there are classified as oligophrenic in Germany and Denmark many persons who, in this country, would not be regarded as defectives, but as "retarded normals."

Thus, it was easy to calculate from the papers by continental experts how many of their oligophrenic *propositi* would not have been born if all the parents of the *propositi* who were also oligophrenic had been sterilized a generation ago; but we had great difficulty in ascertaining from the papers how many of the oligophrenic *propositi* were sufficiently low-grade to be classified in this country as mental defectives (and not as retarded normals), and how many of these had parents of the same degree of mental backwardness. In this connection the Brock Report says: "The fact that so many of the parents are border-line cases explains, to a great extent, the wide variation in the estimates given by various investigators of the proportion of parents who are mentally defective. A slight modification of the standards might result in a large increase in the number of persons regarded as mentally defective among these border-line cases. Clinically, there is no definite line separating mental defect from dullness; the one condition merges into the other."

Two recently published investigations upon children throw some light on this problem. The first was conducted by Dr. Frederick Grundy in an area in East Suffolk; the second by Dr. H. O. Wildenskov in Denmark. Dr. Grundy has very kindly allowed me to see his original thesis, an abstract of which was published in the *British Medical Journal* of June 30th, 1934; the volume in which Dr. Wildenskov's investigation is described was reviewed by Dr. J. A. Fraser Roberts in the *EUGENICS REVIEW* of July 1934 (p. 152).

From Dr. Grundy's thesis the following figures are quoted: The population investigated comprised some 45,500 persons. The elementary schools contained 6,648 children, 14.6 of the total population. Of these, 750 were recorded as dull or defective on the teachers' lists, 550 children being over the age of 8. This figure includes 165 children

who were 'mentally defective'—i.e. 135 feeble-minded, 23 imbeciles and 7 idiots. Dr. Grundy obtained family histories of 149 of these defectives, 15 of whom were illegitimate. These 149 defective propositi had 9 defective sibs, so that family histories were available for all of 158 mental defectives. How many of these would not have been born if parenthood had been prevented in all mentally defective persons of the preceding generation?

Dr. Grundy draws an interesting distinction between defectiveness in a social and in an educational sense. "Rather more than half of the children," he writes in his article in the *British Medical Journal*, "who are certifiable as defectives for the purposes of the Education Acts, will not be defective in a social sense in adult life in a rural area. That is to say that there exists a wide disparity between the standards used in the educational and social classifications of feeble-mindedness, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the use of the single term 'feeble-minded' in two distinct senses, both of which are legal and not scientific, is highly confusing in an enquiry of this sort." In examining his pedigrees, it became clear that, of the 149 defective propositi and their 9 sibs, 10 had one or both parents defective in a social sense, and 38 in an educational sense. If, therefore, all persons defective in a social and educational sense had been prevented from breeding a generation ago, 48 out of the 158 defectives, or *almost exactly 30 per cent.*, would not have been born.

Dr. H. O. Wildenskov, who conducted the second investigation referred to above, is the medical superintendent of the Keller Institution for Mental Defectives, Brejning, Denmark. Briefly, his chief aim was to ascertain if the milder grades of defect were more strongly hereditary than the severer grades. Two groups of 50 children were studied; group A consisting of children in a special school, who suffered from a mild degree of defect, and group B of asylum children, whose defect was more serious. Though Dr. Wildenskov presented in his paper a most thorough and detailed analysis of the family histories and backgrounds of

the 50 defectives in each of these two groups, he did not furnish the information necessary to correlate the degree of defectiveness existing between the defective propositi and their parents. He has, however, very kindly sent me this information in a private communication. He has ascertained how many of the oligophrenes in groups A and B, whose intelligence quotient fell below the figure of 75 (i.e. who could be counted as mentally defective in the English sense), had one or both parents with a similar limitation of intelligence. He writes as follows:

"For the school material in group A, I obtained the following results: in 20 school families, one or both parents were mental defectives. They had a total of 120 children; 31 were dead at the time of the research, 23 were normal or unknown, 11 were debile, 43 dullards,* and 51, including the 20 propositi, were mental defectives. Had all mentally defective persons in Denmark been sterilized a generation ago, 20 (40 per cent.) of my school propositi would not have been born; and, in addition to these, another 31 mentally defective sibs of the propositi would not have been born. For the asylum material in group B, only one family had one or both (actually both) parents mentally defective. These had 7 children, of whom two were dead, one was debile, one a dullard, and three mental defectives. Thus in group B, only one of the 50 propositi, i.e. 2 per cent., would not have been born if all persons mentally defective in our sense had been sterilized in Denmark a generation ago."

In the EUGENICS REVIEW of October 1933 (page 184), I wrote a short memorandum upon an investigation conducted by Dr. L. S. Penrose upon 100 sub-cultural families, containing defectives who were inmates of the Royal Institution, Colchester. Of these 100 propositi who were defective in a "sub-cultural" sense, 28 (28 per cent.) had one or both parents certifiable as mentally defec-

* The terms "debile" and "dullard" express mild degrees of oligophrenia which do not amount to mental defectiveness as appraised in this country.

tive, and Dr. Penrose estimates that approximately a quarter of the inmates of the Royal Institution, Colchester, come from sub-cultural families. On the improbable assumption, therefore, that none of the remaining defectives who fall outside the sub-cultural group (three-quarters of the inmates of the Royal Institution) had a mentally defective parent, the minimum reduction attainable by preventing the parenthood a generation ago of all certifiable defectives in the community would be a quarter of 28 per cent., i.e. 7 per cent. But it must be remembered that the proportion of sub-cultural and other types of defectives in the Royal Institution at Colchester is much smaller than that which obtains on an average in the general community—this for the reason that lower grades of defectives tend to find their way into institutions, and are found there in larger numbers than in the general community.

The conclusion which may tentatively be drawn from the very careful investigations above referred to is that, if the parents of defectives are closely scrutinized, it will be found that more than 5 per cent. are born of parents one or both of whom are mental defectives; and that the principle of sterilization, if limited to mental defectives, but applied to them in the most thorough-going

way, would have more appreciable eugenic results than has been suggested by some authorities.

In conclusion, however, it must be clearly recognized that the type of sterilization recommended by the Brock Committee is strictly voluntary and that, to begin with, at any rate, only a small proportion of defectives for whom it might be regarded as appropriate would apply to be sterilized. It would, therefore, be idle to expect appreciable results from legalizing a measure of voluntary sterilization *limited to mental defectives*. From the eugenic standpoint the chief value of the recommendations of the Brock Committee are that they advocate voluntary sterilization for the probable carriers of mental defectiveness, i.e., for the types of person who, in this country, would be regarded as retarded normals and who, in Denmark, would be regarded as debile persons or dullards. In this connection the shocking family history quoted on page 87 of the Brock Report is interesting. In this family 17 children had been born, of whom 12 were living. Of these 12 living children, 8 were defective. *But neither the father nor the mother of this family was defective.* They were carriers of defectiveness, that is retarded normals.



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